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NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Attorney General
and Minister responsible for Multiculturalism

FAMILY FOCUSED JUSTICE SERVICES CENTRE OPENS

NANAIMO – A pilot project that will focus on solving legal problems in a less adversarial way was officially opened today by Attorney General Wally Oppal and Mayland McKimm, QC, vice chair of the board of directors of the Legal Services Society.

The Nanaimo Family Justice Services Centre is one of the first initiatives to demonstrate a new approach to providing family justice services. Created in response to recommendations by the B.C. justice review task force in June 2005, it builds on extensive efforts over the last several years to move the family justice system away from an adversarial process. The goal is to better focus the justice process on values of family autonomy, co-operation and the best interests of the child.

"This centre really is an excellent example of making the justice system more responsive to the needs of the public," said Oppal. "It offers families the opportunity to obtain information and assistance to help resolve their justice issues, if possible, without taking an adversarial approach and without going to court."

"The Legal Services Society is pleased to be working with the ministry to meet the legal needs of people in Nanaimo," said LSS board of directors chair Geoff Cowper, QC. "By offering families a front door to the justice system, and a groundbreaking assessment and referral service, this centre is at the forefront of justice reform initiatives. What's especially exciting about this project is our commitment to considering clients' overall needs -- to seeing clients as whole people, whose legal problems exist in a larger context and are often linked to other issues."

The Ministry of Attorney General, along with other justice, health and social service ministries, has embarked on a three-year plan to ensure the justice system meets the needs of individuals, families, businesses and communities in a more effective, timely and meaningful way. Reforms are built around the concept of early solutions and faster justice. Information on justice reform is available at: www.ag.gov.bc.ca/justice-reform-initiatives/index.htm.

The Nanaimo Family Justice Services Centre offers a range of services to families undergoing separation and divorce. Resources include information, education, assessment, referral, legal services, dispute resolution and self-help services. Through an integrated team approach, the centre helps families solve problems and look at alternatives to court. In cases where court is the best option, the centre helps people to prepare to participate effectively in negotiation, mediation or adjudication.

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The centre has served about 800 individuals since opening in April. With a staff of seven and a roster of advice lawyers and duty counsel, the centre is located at 302-65 Front St. The centre's website (www.nanaimo.familyjustice.bc.ca/index.htm) has information on its services.

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1 backgrounder(s) attached.

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